



Committee on HOMELAND SECURITY

Chairman Michael McCaul

Opening Statement

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Statement of Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Texas) Committee on Homeland Security

“From al-Shabaab to al-Nusra: How Westerners Joining Terror Groups Overseas Affect the Homeland”

Remarks as Prepared

Just weeks ago, Americans watched as hundreds ran for cover and 68 people were murdered by vicious terrorists invading a Western-style shopping mall in Kenya. Terrorizing these innocent people, including some Americans, were al-Shabaab militants – Somali fighters who executed a horrifying attack on a soft-target much like many of the malls in our homeland. The most striking concern for Americans is that within the ranks of al-Shabaab are our own neighbors, including 40-50 known fighters who have left our shores to fight alongside these jihadists in Africa and the Middle East.

Just last weekend, our military carried out a mission to damage al-Shabaab, underscoring the direct interest we have in upsetting its jihadist network. It is yet another group aligned with al-Qaeda that would not think twice about hitting a Western target if given the opportunity.

Today we face a disturbing trend. More than a hundred Americans are fighting overseas supporting terrorism, from the Middle East in Syria or to Africa and Somalia. Individuals in our own communities are being recruited by organizations like al-Shabaab. These individuals directly undermine our homeland security. They have been recruited inside the U.S., have left, and could potentially return – presenting a vast vulnerability in our counterterrorism efforts.

Overseas, while fighting and supporting terrorists, they receive military training, combat experience and grow their jihadist network. Coming back with these skills and connections extends the spider web of extremism to our own backyards.

We know how this journey commonly starts. Individuals are either recruited by a trusted member of their community, or over the Internet. They are persuaded to leave the US and travel abroad to fight against our nation’s interests. We have seen their recruiting materials – and they offer conflicted youths the opportunity to join a fight against an enemy it barely knows.

For example, Omar Hammami, an American citizen from Alabama, was one of the more public Americans who traveled overseas to join a terrorist organization. Hammami joined al-Shabaab in Somalia. Unlike the almost 50 Americans of Somali decent that have left the US to support al-Shabaab, Hammami is not of Somali decent. He made a name for himself in Somalia and rose to a leadership position, eventually being placed on the FBI's most wanted list for violating US law. He advocated al Shabaab becoming more global and violent.

Syria is another example. Americans for the past two years have traveled to Syria to support the rebels, mainly al-Qaeda factions. While the number of Americans is low, the number of Westerners is high, which poses a threat not only to our allies in Europe, but also here in the US. Fighting alongside of hardened al-Qaeda jihadist will provide these "recruits" with the unfortunate tools they need to wreck havoc on the country they were once a part of.

The training, battle hardening, the exposure to the most radical ideas and propaganda all lead us to ask ourselves how we prevent these people, who have turned their backs on their country, from bringing home the hatred and death they learned supporting al-Qaeda.

The Administration must confront this issue with its full attention. The events in Kenya, while an ocean away, are not far from us. The notion that if we don't talk about it, the problem will go away is disturbing. The Administration's failed narrative of al-Qaeda being all but decimated shows a lack of will for addressing threats, and presents weakness our enemies will exploit. This danger is real, and with over 40% of DHS leadership positions remaining vacant, including the secretary, the Administration is showing the American people how much it cares about homeland security.

Today, we will examine how Americans travelling to fight alongside jihadists overseas poses a threat to the homeland, and what can be done to stop this problem. From the suicide bombing last month at a Christian church in Pakistan, to the Westgate mall attack in Kenya –extremists are increasingly bent on destroying American values, and American lives. We must not underestimate this threat, and we must better understand and examine the threat posed by our own citizens joining this fight abroad – and potentially bringing their mission home with them.

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